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Jewish athletes proud to compete at European Maccabi Games in Berlin

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Jul 29, 2015 • July 29, 2015 • 3 minute read



For Vlad Kovalevsky, there didn't seem to be a choice.

As a proud member of Canada's Jewish community with deep ties to basketball, Kovalevsky felt it was imperative to put a team together to compete in the 14th European Maccabi Games (held every four years for Jewish athletes) because of the historically significant host city for this year's multi-sport event — Berlin.

So there was the coach on Tuesday, along with 15 fellow Canadians, at an event this country rarely attends, marching in the opening ceremony at Waldbühne Berlin — an outdoor amphitheatre built by the Nazis to play host to the boxing competition at the 1936 Olympics. Just hours earlier, they attended a Holocaust memorial outside the same Olympic Stadium where Adolf Hitler was the host country's leader for a Summer Games in which he sought to exclude Jewish athletes.

In a country where Jews have experienced unfathomable losses through the Holocaust — and later at the 1972 Olympics in Munich, when 11 members of the Israel delegation were taken hostage and murdered — Tuesday brought forth all sorts of emotions for an event-record 2,300 Jewish athletes from 36 countries. While carrying heavy hearts, they also knew they were part of a great breakthrough — hosting a major athletic event in a place which now has one of the fastest-growing Jewish populations in the world.

“It's mostly about being in Berlin, anywhere else (in Europe) we most likely would not go,” said Kovalevsky, who competed in basketball at the main Maccabi Games (held in Israel every four years) and the Pan American Maccabi Games (another event held every four years, in which Canada is a regular participant).

“We just wanted to experience Berlin, we thought that would be very valuable for the kids. Marching in the opening ceremonies in a place where Hitler said no Jews allowed, being a part of it, that's priceless.”

Toronto golfer Jeremy Freedman, who competed in two previous Maccabi Games in Israel, carried the Canadian flag into the Berlin amphitheatre. Many years ago, he went to Germany on business and had a bad experience, saying he felt “very uncomfortable.” But on a trip to Atlanta earlier this year, he met a Maccabi official who told him of the plan to have the Games in Berlin. At that point, he decided he had to return to Germany — something he never thought he'd do.

“To think of what the stadium was built for, what Hitler's intentions were, to be in the stadium singing the Israeli national anthem was almost overwhelming,” Freedman said. “I texted my wife and told her I was so happy to be here. I cannot imagine missing that moment.”

Seventy years after World War II ended and 50 years after the forming of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel, the Maccabi organizers had the difficult task of trying to find the right balance, the right tone, for the event. They told the story of Gretel Bergmann, a Jewish high jumper who tied the German record in that sport one month before the 1936 Games. Two weeks later, she was told she was no longer on the team for the Olympics.

Today, though, Bergmann's accomplishments are remembered in the German sports hall of fame and her record has been restored after being removed from official books.

It's one example of hope, one reason for optimism — the kind of story that offers encouragement going forward. But no one forgets the past and everyone realizes there are still issues in the present — there is heavy security for these Games at a time when anti-Semitic incidents have been on the rise in Europe.

“I definitely think (the Maccabi Games in Germany) needed to happen and I hope everything goes smoothly,” Kovalevsky said. “From our side, there are no issues, no problems. Us being in Germany, just accept it and let us experience it ... Our culture, there has always been worries from every single angle. But we've just got to focus on what we're here for and what we need to do to enjoy the time.”

On Tuesday, they accomplished just that — embracing the moment while remembering the troubled past.

“It was a good balance between looking back and what this means for the future,” Freedman said. “It was very uplifting.”

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